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INDIGENOUS ISSUES

Written statement submitted by Four Directions Council, a non-governmental organization in consultative status (category II)

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[3 April 1996]

1. We would like to offer a brief history of the concerns and problems of our indigenous peoples in Treaty Four Territory, and the Saskatchewan region, and their implicit relationship to agenda item 23, "Indigenous issues", and, provide a series of recommendations for consideration and official record.

2. For centuries prior to contact with the European, we practised our own forms of government. We treated with other indigenous peoples, to protect and pursue economic, social, cultural and political development.

3. We had our own justice systems to implement our laws. We had the ability to enter into international treaties with the British Crown on a nation-to-nation basis. Essentially, and in practice we conducted ourselves as Nations.

4. After contact, we have seen the development and implementation of destructive policies by the colonial governments: to strip us of our lands, our cultures, our spiritual beliefs, our political systems, our way of life and more importantly, our ability to govern ourselves and determine our own destinies.

5. Strangely enough, most Canadians are better acquainted with the history of indigenous peoples in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries than they are with the unsavoury realities of recent years. Canadians know that the early settlers and governments took lands from the indigenous peoples, by use of devious and questionable methods, but it is relatively easy to feel detached and separated from those events of long ago. It is more difficult to deny responsibility for the misguided policies of the twentieth century and its effects on the indigenous peoples in Canada.

6. There is an illusion that progressive thinking and improved attitudes have brought fair treatment to Canada's indigenous peoples, and this illusion has been communicated to the world as a basis to forge alliances and partnerships.

7. All indigenous communities are still enduring the malignant effects of those misguided governmental policies. The social and economic conditions prevalent on modern-day reserves in Canada are a legacy of the decisions and policies of the most powerful institutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many of those policies and attitudes that devised and shaped them are in existence today.

8. The inclusion in the agenda of the Commission of indigenous issues, as a separate item is viewed with great optimism and welcomed. It is an undeniable fact that more work and understanding must be achieved, as a respected colleague stated in a Working Group forum: "the world will be out of balance, if the red man is not allowed to take his place, alongside the white, black and yellow men of the world".

The Four Directions Council, would like to put forth several recommendations:

(a) That indigenous issues:

(i) Remain as a separate and distinguishable item now and in future United Nations functions, events and developments;

(ii) Not be relegated, confined or contained under "Minority problems".

(b) That draft declarations:

(i) Remain unchanged and unaltered in their present form;

(ii) Represent to all a minimum standard;

(iii) Be adopted in their present unaltered form by the Commission on Human Rights;

(iv) Be recommended by the Commission to the Economic and Social Council for approval in unaltered form.

(c) That a permanent forum:

(i) Be viewed by all parties as a necessary and progressive step in the evolution of the United Nations system;

(ii) Be established within the time-frames of the Decade of the World Indigenous People;

(iii) During the formation and establishment processes, be allowed to proceed unhindered and free of biases and discriminatory approaches;

(iv) Be established at the highest level in the United Nations system;

(v) Be granted authority to sanction effective, acceptable resolutions for indigenous peoples.

(d) That the treaty study be completed by the Special Rapporteur according to the time requirements.